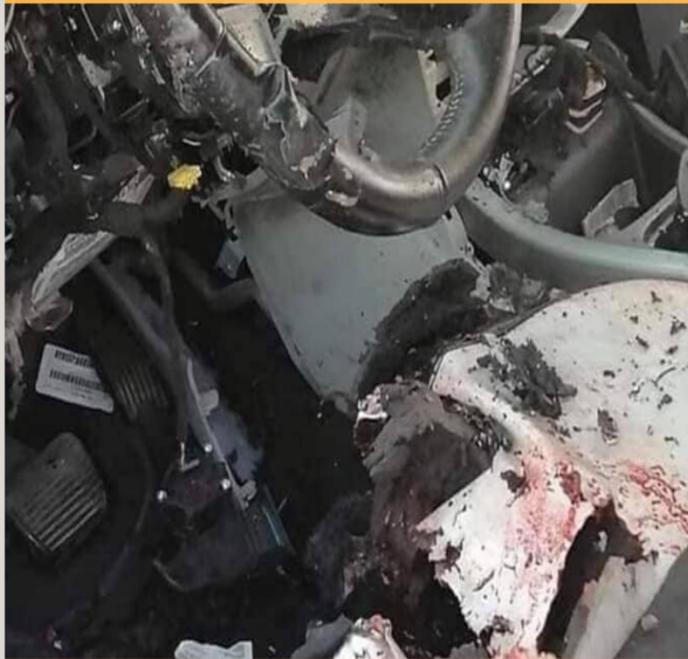




## ASSASSINATIONS & ABDUCTIONS.. INCAPABLE GOVERNMENT



**A documentation report for assassinations and abductions cases targeted Civil activists and Human Rights Defenders in Iraq since 1st Oct - 31Dec 2019**

A third river of blood between Tigris and Euphrates<sup>1</sup>.

There is an unprecedented, dangerous and systematic escalation of assassinations, abductions, and terrorization of human rights activists and defenders since the starting of the protest in the beginning of October 2019. Al Namaa Center for Human Rights has followed the deterioration of human rights in Iraq, mainly targeting human rights defenders.

Al Namaa Center for Human Rights has exerted great efforts to investigate and document abductions, assassinations, assassinations attempts and defamation against civil society activists and human rights defenders. As of today, our team faced many challenges, including intimidation and threats against four members of the team who wrote this report.

In some cases, victims, families of defenders, as well as activists who were abducted, refrained giving any information about their abusers, they also fear revenge by armed groups. Four of those abstainers said they have received messages of direct threats of murder in case they revealed any information or scenes they have witnessed during the abduction period or giving any information concerning search and documentation cases and with the abduction victims. Since 17 of them refused to share any information in this regard upon receiving death threats or sharing videos of them undergoing degrading treatment through social media, which were filmed during the abduction period under coercion.

This report is subjective about the pattern of assassination and abduction cases against activists and defenders of human rights, either for their direct participation in the demonstrations and sit-ins, or because they were considered supporters of the demonstrations, or because they informed the international community and public opinion about the violations in the current protests.

At the time of writing this report, there was (64) recorded cases of abduction and assassination against human rights defenders and civil society activists. Our team reached to all abduction victims and conducted direct interviews with some of them and families of the dead victims.

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<sup>1</sup>Majeed mourns deeply and spontaneously his friend Thaer Al-Taeb's death

during the interview we documented (9) statements about assassination cases from the families of victims and (38) direct statements from the victims of abductions. Those statements, as well as analyzing video footage that was trusted intel source which we relied on, in writing this report.

The Center points out that the statements gathered by the team, and with regards to our commitment to the Policy of Victims and Eyewitness Protection, all names of victims who testified were codified with letters, in order to insure their personal safety and the safety of their families.

### **Assassinations and Assassination attempts:**

The absolute lack of action by the authorities to take any measures in protecting the defenders and stop the systematic targeting and terrorizing campaign against them during the demonstration period has paved the way to the continuation of this horrific campaign, and increasing the number of victims.

Assassinations have been on the rise in a shocking way revealing the massive lack of control on security, and the attitude of systematic targeting against activists and defenders of human rights. The period between 1 October to the point of writing this report is the bloodiest and most expansive and since 2003, the defenders and human rights activists are currently living in an atmosphere of horror as a result of those incidents.

The forms and patterns of assassinations the Center has observed have varied, they are considered a form of organized murder despite its variation, by using sticky bombs (magnetically adhesive IED) that can be remotely triggered, and machine guns in addition to using weapon silencers which is the most horrifying and commonly used, at least one case was detected where the victim was ran over by the perpetrators after the assassination when they fled the scene, in other cases victims were killed after abduction and physical torture and the signs of torture were plain to see.

Some assassination attempts included people supportive of the protests without actually participating in it such as providing logistical needs for the demonstrators (food, clothes, blankets, medical necessities or medication).

Most of the assassinations and assassination attempts were done by motorcycles and vehicles that have no registration plates driven by unknown masked men, for example, our monitors have documented an assassination attempt by individuals driving a car with governmental

registration plate, cameras, in another case, have revealed there's a car affiliated to one of the security actors, at the moment of the assassination, in an area where there are security forces and important and main streets, some cases occurred dozens of meters away from security headquarters, which were fortified and have intensive security, but we did not receive info on the intervention or response or even pursuit the perpetrators by security forces or taking any immediate measure relating to the crime, which proves that those forces did not do their role in protecting the citizens especially activists and defenders of human rights, this shows a clear lack of action in performing their duties.

Since the demonstrations broke out in middle and southern Iraq, the Center has documented (18) murders and assassination attempts between Baghdad (4) cases, Basra (2) cases, Misssan (6) cases, Dhi Qar (2) cases, Diwaniya (1) case, Wasset (1) case, Karbala (1) case.

Despite the horrific security deterioration and the continuation of assassinations against activists and defenders of human rights, no emergency security measures were taken to limit this lethal campaign by law enforcements and government in general and lack of conviction by authorities too.

At the backdrop of this complete inaction by the government and guns anarchy in the most secured areas and security dissemination, the militias moved freely and easily which affirms the claims of security or government collusion contributed in the spread of terror in all the places where there is activists and defenders whether in the demonstrations squares, residence, or their work.

## **Abduction of Activists and Defenders of Human Rights:**

Al Namaa Center team began to follow all abduction cases closely through the collected statements by the victims of abduction, it was revealed that the armed groups is starting to take abduction as a systematic approach to intimidate and prevent human rights activists from participating and influencing the protests, it was revealed that most of the abduction cases were because of protests support in an indirect way or actual participation in the protests or contributing in detection and documenting violations coinciding with the protests.

The abductions occurred in public places in various ways represented in government and non-government vehicles, mass or individual abduction, detention in anonymous places and government administrative offices not suitable for detention, the periods of abduction also varied from few days to long periods that exceeds two months and some are still ongoing such as the case of the Lawyer Ali Jassib in Missan governorate who was kidnapped in the start of the protests and his fate is unknown at the time of writing this report.

All the kidnapped were subjected to torture and cruel treatment to extract false confessions by force, they were accused of malicious charges including treason, espionage and intelligence contacts for foreign countries calling them names indicative of treason such as (Son of Embassies) (Agents of the West) (Joker<sup>2</sup>).

The armed groups have gone as far as abducting and releasing people in public and crowded places despite the intense security presence, such was the case in abductions in (Karrada, Nasir, Sa'doon, Abu Nuwas).

Some activists were arrested without formal commands to do so, and in full view of high security leaderships, as stated by (K.S) to Center's monitors (my arrest was in full view of Major General (T.Y) during my talk with him about the density of exposure of demonstrators to teargas then, I heard one the government forces calling the Major General saying "is this (K.S)?"

I was arrested and led to a government car model (Salvador) that I recognized before they put a blindfold over my eyes, I was led to an anonymous place, where I was detained for 5 hours with over 50 other detainees, I didn't know the reason of their detention, during my detention,

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<sup>2</sup> Joker is a concept related to a movie linking the Dissemination of violence and chaos

I underwent torture by stabbing three times in my right leg, two from the back and one from the front, Also, I was electrocuted by electric sticks in my upper and lower extremities, chest, back and head and I have the medical reports to prove I was tortured. Then, I was released and I exited alone from a government building not affiliated to law enforcement. After his release, (K.S) there was an assassination attempt against him, unknown people threw an offensive grenade into his house, which resulted in heavy damages in the house and surrounding properties especially the neighbors, according to his statement, unknown people shot 3 bullets at his house.

The activists who were providing services such as (food distribution and help, blankets and mattresses for demonstrators and paramedics) were subjected to abductions as well, there financial sources were questioned by interrogating them during the abduction about embassies and supporting organizations, accusing them of dealing and contacting with foreign actors to provide supplies and sustain the demonstrations momentum, or to support terrorist operations or calling the Ba'athists working against the Iraqi government.

The work team has noticed during documenting the statements, that all groups responsible for the abduction have been closely monitoring social media to see the reaction of the street concerning the demands to release detainees.

As (K.Y) stated to our monitors. (On 15/11/2019 I was kidnapped in Karrada in the middle of Baghdad, after my return from distributing blankets and food to demonstrators, by 3 masked men driving black and shaded Tahoe car. They led me to a place and left me in a dark room I stayed in until the morning with no bed or blanket, in the morning a masked man entered the room and asked me (where is your funding from? Or which embassy or organization support you?), they didn't allow me to drink water for two days until I was released after three days from being kidnapped after they took my phone and wallet).

The abductions were not limited to the protested governorates, it went as far as the governorates that did not witness any popular movement at all, through investigation and data collection, it was revealed that some activists from those governorates were kidnapped as a result of their public solidarity with the protesters through social media .

according to the statement of (S.H) who is one of the relatives of (A.B) who was kidnapped. He lives in (K) governorate, he was kidnapped as a result of a comment he made on Facebook saying (The blood of Nasiriya martyrs is more honorable than the murderous politicians) he was kidnapped for more than 20 days, (S.H) added (The kidnappers were a government security actors, the kidnapped has received many prior warning from employees in a legislative branch).

One of the strange methods of abduction is using (tuk tuks) according to (Y.T) statements, he was kidnapped at gunpoint on 16-12-2019 by (tuk tuk) when he exited Tahrir Square in Baghdad, during the abduction period, he was subjected to all kinds of harsh beating in all parts of his body except the face.

And accusations of treason and espionage with foreign actors, he said that the person who brought him food was speaking in an unknown language that later turned out to be Farsi. He was released on Al- Qannat highway at dawn after forcing him to sign a document vowing not to participate in the demonstrations.

Some families of the kidnapped pressed charges to find out the fate of their kidnapped children, but the government procrastinate and stall in dealing with those cases according to official documents that Al Namaa Center received a copy of.

The father of one of the victims of abduction stated, a woman lured his son then he was kidnapped by 3 armed men who were accompanying the woman upon an arranged date, his father accuses one of the armed groups that has authority in the government due to a previously received threat sent by them.

The Center monitors have documented an abduction case from inside the house of one of the victims, where armed men broke into house in a brutal fashion and broke the front door of his house, they searched for him in all the rooms in the house and he was beaten and forcibly led to a convoy of (Al Hawthiya <sup>3</sup>) according to the kidnapped (F.S) He added, I was transferred to Baghdad Airport Prison and detained in a room with Daesh members,

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<sup>3</sup> Toyota four-wheel drive cars, locally known as Al Hawthiya, it's used by Popular Mobilization Forces in battles

I was electrocuted, they poured hot water on me, I was stung by a scorpion and they torture me with (Falqa<sup>4</sup>).

Al Namaa Center expresses deep discontent of the inhumane torture circumstances that the kidnapped went through, the Center documented the cruel treatment of the activist (R.H) which almost killed him, the torture wasn't for extracting information but for the code to open his cellphone and look at its content. The armed groups used methods of sexual blackmail through coercion to take photos with a naked woman in a degrading manner to ensure he will not be participating in the demonstrations and he won't say any information related to the incident.

The Center received claims that kidnappers use sexual assault as a method and approach to blackmail female victims in cases that are hard to disclose because the Center did not have the time to confirm their accuracy.

At the backdrop of government inadequacy and lack of rule of law, the armed gangs and groups grew bolder and went as far as committing mass abductions in Baghdad that sometimes reached 5 paramedics at a time and 12 activists in another.

Al Namaa Center has documented the statements of abduction victims collectively, one of the 12 victims (A.S) said (we visited Tahrir Square on 6-12-2019 to participate in the protests and on our way to return to Karbala, we were kidnapped in Abu Nawas street.

In a place about 500 meters from Tahrir Square despite the intense security presence in this area, by 4 beige (Salvador) cars that don't have license plates, men wearing black exited the car and covered our faces with black bags, the drove out car and we were transported to an unknown building, we were 11 activists in one bus and we were kidnapped with the driver, we stayed at that place for 3 days, during which we were tortured by electricity, strangulation and beaten with cables and treated inhumanely and all our personal possessions were confiscated from phones to money and even the bus we were in. We were released on 10-12-2019 in a dumpster in Al Hussieniya in northern Baghdad at 9:45 pm)

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<sup>4</sup> A torture method where the person is hung upside down and his feet beaten with a stick



One of the mass kidnapped paramedics (L.S) said ( After our return from Tahrir square in 14 Ramadan our car was stopped by (Tahoe) cars and pick-up truck that had a civilian license plates, armed men wearing civilian clothes exited the cars, they were around 30 years old, and the put blindfolds on us and led to an unknown area, we were released the following day, in Al- Washash area after cruel treatment and accusations of treason) (L.S) added saying ( I think our release was due to popular media pressure that was focused on us

The Center confirmed through statements of the victims that there is large number of abductions attempts that armed people have done without (Letham<sup>5</sup>) and that is indicative of their domination over security facilitates and their underestimation of security forces capabilities of revealing and holding them accountable, which is indicative of clear lack of security.

All the abduction cases happened in place of high security presence and controlled roads by multiple security barriers, they were done by constant surveillance and stalking of the targets, meaning that those armed groups are keen to oppress freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly, and those abductions were not random but organized and selective with one goal which is robbing protesters of their sense of security and safety in absence of protection

### **Intimidation of Activists and defenders of Human Rights:**

Since the protests started in October 2019, many practices and methods were detected to intimidate and terrorize activists and human rights defenders and their supported in the areas where there are no protests

The Center has documented (7) cases of different patterns including burning a defender's car in front of his house, pursuing and trying to kidnap one of the activists, threats of elimination and death through phone calls with horrifying speech like ( I will stomp on your bloodied head), receiving multiple calls from unknown numbers and international numbers, hacking cellphones with degrading messages, investigating inside government cars without arrest warrant and the Center's team detected abduction attempts

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<sup>5</sup> Mask used to hide the face

and threats to kidnap families of activists to prevent them from demonstrating or support demonstration.

Al Nmaa Center has followed many cases of activists and defender's intimidation in the governorates where there are no protests. In the case of the defender (S.L) in Saladin governorate, he was summoned upon sharing posts supporting the demonstrations in the middle and southern Iraq, he was forced to sign a pledge not to share and support the protests. And in Anbar, the Center team detected two cases of arrests for supporting demonstrations, the local government and security forces have promoted that any calling for demonstration or peaceful assembly, is targeting to violate public peace and is affiliated with Daesh.

Al Namaa Center has investigated claims that surfaced more than once about activists who were kidnapped and filmed in degrading positions, then threatening them to share the pictures and videos in case the continued to participate, support the protests or revealed the kidnapper's identity.

This horrific, degrading and inhumane treatment has led many activists to flee their homes and residence, losing their jobs and heading towards a future filled with danger with their families.

## **Recommendations:**

### **I. To Government Actors:**

1. The Ministry of Interior must conduct independent, immediate, comprehensive and impartial investigations in all the assassination and abduction cases against human rights defenders and human rights activists, ensuring transparency, objectivity and depth in the investigations until the perpetrator is found and announcing the results of the investigation in order not to accuse unknown actors.
2. The government must take (immediate, effective, serious and real) steps to limit firearms to government.
3. All law enforcements must explore the fate of the missing of the kidnapped especially the data list of (169) missing persons that the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights have published to reveal the actors responsible for the abductions.

4. The judicial authority represented by the High Judicial Council must hasten to end the cases of abduction and murder of activists, and not to stall in dealing with those cases.
5. The Social Police must reach to all abduction and assassination attempt victims to make them aware of the importance of resorting to courts to ensure their rights, prove the danger, and provide protection guarantees before and after filing the complaints, and filing legal lawsuits at the specialized judicial authorities to bring justice and compensate for the harm.
6. All security forces in all its division must consider the claim shared on social media and traditional media about the possibility of the presence of secret prisons for detention affiliated to the influential armed groups.
7. All law enforcements must be serious and strict in preventing cars with tinted glass or that doesn't have license plate and unregistered motorcycles and not to facilitate the work of those who carry government badges or powerful armed groups.
8. The Ministry of Health must provide appropriate medical support for the wounded by assassination attempts and facilitate the travel procedure of those who need treatment outside of Iraq.

## **II. To Diplomatic Missions:**

1. The diplomatic missions in Iraq and they are, members of Human Rights Council must approach their ministries of foreign affairs for pressuring to hold a special session concerning (Dangerous Violations of Human Rights) in Iraq coinciding with holding of the works of Human Rights Council 2020.

### **III. To International Civil Society Organizations:**

- 1-The international donor organization specialized in protecting human rights activists and cooperating, partnering and coordinating with local specialized organizations in this matter to confirm the validity of claims, threats, and dangers to determine who needs urgent protection.

### **IV. To Local Civil Society Organizations:**

1. The civil society organizations specialized in human rights must implement programs to spread awareness between defenders and activists of mechanisms of digital protection and personal safety and security.